

MAPPING CAPITALISM: CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY IN THE CITY OF LONDON

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ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on how Sinclair and Miéville's psychogeographic texts explore the city of London in order to show how globalist imperatives can affect our experience of space itself. Both explore the city in detail to convey that there is a threatened 'underbelly' population of London's sub-cultures and communities, and these are being side-lined by globalist and political power over urban space. The texts are concerned with the diminishing effect that a purely capitalist and convenience-based mode of city living has on the urban dweller's freedom to exist in space.

INTRODUCTION

Iain Sinclair's *Lights Out for the Territory* (2003) and China Miéville's *London's Overthrow* (2012) are two texts which present an unorthodox vision of London in which the experience of the city is hegemonized by capitalist power and globalization. Sinclair and Miéville use the lens of psychogeography in order to show how London's culture is diluted in the interests of wider capitalist and political motives. Through walking and photographing, both texts look beyond the prescribed notions of London as a capital city. *Lights out for the Territory* comprises nine essays in which Sinclair presents his psychogeographic project, each exploring a different walk that he and his photographer, Mark Atkins, have undertaken in London. These walking excursions range from a tour of Lord Archers' home to the funeral parade of Reggie Kray. China Miéville fuses the polemic and the psychogeographic in *London's Overthrow*, which uses a modern photographic lens to explore alternative aspects of London and the tensions surrounding the 2011 riots there. Sinclair's and Miéville's narratives shift between microscopic and macroscopic depictions of London so that the city emerges as a scene in which capitalist advertisements dominate influence over space, while the more organic culture and history of London is drowned out by capitalist noise. This article discusses these texts in terms of how this influence can play into wider social and political issues, drawing upon the tensions between the local and global voices in urban space in order to explore how political and capitalist motives might alter our experience of the modern city.

REIMAGINING PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

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Psychogeography generally considers the effects of geographic environment in relation to the behaviour of the humans who inhabit it. In recent decades, psychogeography has become popular as a literary mode of human emotional and sensory response to space. In a literary context, the term Psychogeography is linked to a figure in writing who wanders by foot, attempting to tune in to hidden experiences in city space. This idea was established through the early 20th century modernist literary figure of the Flâneur found in the work of Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire (Benjamin, 1983; Baudelaire and Mayne, 2012). The Flâneur figure appeared in late 19th and early 20th century modernist literature as a faceless man who allowed himself to be taken in the direction of the crowds. Flânerie came to represent a fascination with anonymous drifting in Europe's capital cities, and, by modernist interpretation, is associated with the alienating effects of living in heavily populated modern cities. Modernist writers used the figure as a means of trying to access the changing cultural energy of Europe's emerging urban societies.

Walter Benjamin's writing on Baudelaire in particular establishes a link between flânerie and contemporary psychogeography. In *The Arcades Project* (1982), Benjamin and Jennings (2006) describes flânerie as a character's way of contemplating the shift towards modernity in an age when Paris was becoming a commodified city. The anxiety he expresses in relation to modernity and its effect on individuality have been found in the earlier views of social theorist Georg Simmel in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), in which modernity and the technological age are presented as oppressors of individuality and culture in the city (Gieseck, et al., (2014). David Frisby makes a case for this connection: 'Not only did Benjamin read Simmel's [study] *The Philosophy of Money* in the course of writing *Passagenarbeit* and occasionally quote his

other writings, but, more importantly, he extracts a number of central motifs in Baudelaire's work, some of which at least suggest stimulating comparisons with Simmel's work.' (Frisby, 2013[1981]). This establishes early links between the practice of journalistic writing about walking and observing in urban spaces, and understanding modernity with an emphasis on the importance of the city wanderer in culturally understanding changing urban spaces. Literary psychogeography finds some of its central concerns in the effects of technology and commodification on city spaces. The psychogeographer, then, might be seen as a modern literary reinvention of the Flâneur figure, combining the wandering gaze with anxieties over the effects of capitalism and its appropriation of space. In the texts of Iain Sinclair and China Miéville explored in this paper, the Flâneur becomes a political and cultural resistant figure, exploring space against a current of advertising, office workers and buildings, rather than moving with the crowds.

IS NAVIGATION POLITICAL?

An important term in analysing the way in which local and global voices compete for space in these texts is Neo-liberalism. Sinclair and Miéville indicate the detrimental effects of neo-liberalism on society, viewing it as a dehumanising model of politics which exploits the population for their potential as consumers and as a labour force, and which marginalizes minority groups and liberal ideology. Neo-liberalism is a political term that arose in the late 20th century and went on to define the Thatcherite ideology of British politics. It favours free market capitalism and opposes state intervention as a restorer of 'social justice' in terms of wealth distribution. When 'Neo-liberal forces' are described in this essay the term refers to the rigorous imposing of this doctrine through measures such as privatisation, deregulation of government power in market economies and competition in public sectors. The article will discuss how *Lights Out for the Territory* and *London's Overthrow* seek to show how heavily neo-liberalist ideas of free-market capitalism, and political and authorial powers in London are able to limit public freedom in urban space as a means of protecting the neo-liberal prerogatives that London upholds as the business capital of the UK.

Sinclair uses psychogeography to interrogate London through the act of walking; it allows him to scrutinise the city in more detail and with an unfixed pace or route. He aims to look beyond the monotonous landscape of offices and advertisements for signs of alternative activity or history which disrupt the conservative, sanitised surface level of London. Walking is an essential tool in his psychogeographic mission and his depiction of it ranges from a cathartic, connecting activity to a frustrating and exhausting activity that is plagued by modern obstacles such as building sites and no access signs. The opening essay sees Sinclair and Atkins attempt to walk in a V shaped route that they have mapped through London. The 'V' is an alternative route to the ones that may be conventionally followed in London; such as those constructed by the dominant structures of public transport and urban planning. Through this V route they intend to uncover the 'dormant energies' (Sinclair, 2003) of history and culture that lie outside of these structures. As his walking mission progresses, however, the 'V' becomes obscured as he finds it difficult to access the 'alternative reading' (Sinclair, 2003) of the city that he set out to explore. It becomes apparent that the act of walking freely in London is heavily obstructed by the transport systems and the privatisation of spaces. We see Sinclair and Aitkins set out on their mission with a physical ease and optimism – 'Easily into our stride, I am explaining the whole insane concept to Marc: on the hoof' (Sinclair, 2003) – but their pedestrian plight is often disrupted. From the formidable architecture – 'those

towers, the sheer weight of glass and steel' (Sinclair, 2003) – to the obstacles that interfere with free movement – 'constantly dodging between building sites, locked churches, roads that have been blocked off' (Sinclair, 2003) – Sinclair depicts an experience of walking and seeing that is oppressed by the architecture and obstacles of a 21st century city.

Sinclair states that 'submission is what the City preaches' (Sinclair, 2003), and, by demonstrating that their walking is obstructed by blocked access and architectural domination of certain spaces, Sinclair points to the way in which public planning and privatisation policies constantly alter public experience in London. The effect is exhausting on both the reader and the walker:

Repeated walks, circuits, attempts to navigate – to get to the heart of the labyrinth – proved frustrating. There was no centre. The geometry had been botched, the alignments twisted to flatter false imperatives: the money lake. The city was an offshore island surrounded, protected by high walls. (Sinclair, 2003)

Here, we see how Sinclair indicates the impossibility of decoding the spaces which make up London by reflecting the inaccessibility of the city in his own writing structure. His convoluted style reflects the 'botched geometry' (Sinclair, 2003) of a city which can no longer be navigated freely, thus drawing the reader into the labyrinth. Through his textual disarrangement of London Sinclair undermines the capitalist organisation – the 'money lake' and its 'false imperatives' – which he perceives to be disorientating his attempts to explore London on foot. His thwarted V route proves to be difficult as he attempts to penetrate the innumerable modern buildings and billboards which gloss the surface of the city. As such, he shows how commercialisation has become indecipherable from space itself. The notion of space being homogenised by city planning as a deliberate is something that Sharon Zukin writes about:

In the early 1960s, the urbanist Jane Jacobs blamed the twentieth-century modernisers who worshipped progress and planned to rebuild all cities with right angles and straight lines. As architects and urban planners, they developed the intellectual tools and aesthetic styles that resulted in homogenised superblocks and high-rise towers, creating what Jacobs called "the great blight of dullness." (Zukin, 2009)

In politically charged language echoing that of Zukin, Sinclair effectively resists these homogenous elements of London through both his oblique and convoluted style. *Light's Out* is filled with so many deviations that it seems to purposefully stray from what thread of the chapter is meant to be, however it is through these deviations that Sinclair unearths the complexities of the city's activities and culture. Sinclair intends to convey a messy vision of London which derails the idea of a neat, unified city, and his textual convolutions lend themselves to this vision. In this way, and through the notion of walking the space in his own curated 'V' route, the text itself counteracts the 'right angles and straight lines' of urbanization that Zukin observed.

Miéville also notions the restriction of pedestrian access to spaces to be part of a wider political agenda. As he explores the construction site of the Olympic stadium, at this point being built in preparation for the 2012 games in London, he too emulates the feeling that walking around London has become a governed activity: 'The paths, the enormous structures are neurotically planned and policed' (Miéville, 2012). Miéville

talks to a local from the area where the Olympic village is being built to understand its effects on the community. The response is a negative one as the man describes such events as 'exploitative of the areas in which they take place. The priorities become the development of the games' (Miéville, 2012). Here, we see an example of authority being asserted over space for a massive city project, one being paid for with taxpayer money, while the community itself is disrupted and their space is policed.

Miéville draws our attention to the notion that where city planning intervenes in space and asserts authority over it, this tends to be to the detriment of the local use of space in favour of larger government projects that are intended to generate capital. In a scene in which police prevent the entrance of walkers who are protesting pension cuts to the supposedly public Paternoster square, Miéville emphasises the way in which walking is bound up with the freedom and civil rights of the public: 'Entrance, though, is not a right: the square, like great and growing swathes of corporatised London, once public, these days only pretends to be, and that if you ask nicely' (Miéville 2012). The square 'pretends' to be public; defined as a free space that is accessible to all, but in actuality, Miéville reveals there to be no such thing in the constantly surveilled city environment. Parks and squares are the 'designated' areas within cities for wandering and for nature within a cityscape, therefore it is interesting that parks become a space for politicised public activity, such as for the pension protest. But through governing authorities deeming the protest an abuse of the free public use of the square, we see how space itself is subject to political jurisdiction. Miéville notes how the protests are quick to be deemed ineffective by the conservative Prime Minister: 'Cameron first denounced, then dismissed the day's action. For the Right, strikes are both devilish and pathetic, have both terrible and absolutely no effects' (Miéville, 2012). We see the act of walking as resistance to government activity being discouraged by authority: through prohibiting protesters' use of supposedly 'free' space - despite the peaceful nature of the protest - the strikes are able to be deterred. Miéville suggests that the public experience of London is increasingly dominated by political authority and capital wealth. Wealth holds the power to create influence in space, shown by the ever-multiplying number of advertisements which 'choke' the city. However, public attempt to assert alternate influence in supposedly 'free' spaces such as parks, through peaceful protest by walking, are quickly curbed by authority.

Sinclair further posits walking as a mode of accessing hidden elements of London and interrogating the limiting effects of the city's modern structures. The historical elements of London that he attempts to track are appropriated by the neo-liberal political landscape and, as such, the city is missing integral markers of its past:

A policy of deliberate misalignment (The temple of Mithras¹, London Stone, the surviving effigies from Ludgate) has violated the integrity of the City's sacred geometry: leaving in the place of well-ordered chaos, regimented anonymity – a climate in which corruption thrives. (Sinclair, 2003)

The violation of what Sinclair refers to as London's 'well-ordered chaos' here suggests that an organic urban structure which pertains to the complex social needs of a city is being subsumed by a one-size-fits-all urbanism. He sees the physical

space of London as being subject to neo-liberalist ideology through neutralisation. Sinclair attempts to unearth a political agenda behind alterations and prohibition in public spaces, suggesting that urban planning is designed to control and neutralise people's experience of space to suit neo-liberal and capitalist imperatives. The real psychogeographic project becomes an interrogation of cultural authenticity in space. In one example, Sinclair walks to Postman's Park, near St Paul's cathedral, which sits on the site of a former 19th Century Church and graveyard. Drawing attention to the constructed nature of the renovated public park, as it is lodged in the middle of high-rise offices, Sinclair depicts it as a place symbolically caught between life and death. It is 'dominated by tall side office buildings: a place for suicides to sit and be sure they were making the right decision' (Sinclair, 2003). The park becomes a physical space that reflects the trapped headspace of citizens oppressed by their own city. The former graveyard, which has been converted into a park, in an attempt to enhance the city fails, to shake its historical connotations of death.

Sinclair goes on to scrutinise the public art installation he finds in Postman's Park. A sculpture of a Minotaur comes under such scrutiny for its failure to reflect any authentic culture or history of the city. The creature's pained and crouched stance is seen as fitting with its forced nature as a piece of art, commissioned as an object for public scrutiny, 'struggling to comprehend the burden it has to bear' (Sinclair 2003). The Minotaur is an example of what Sinclair perceives to be one of London's distorting 'misalignments', commissioned as pure aesthetic filler. He notes that depoliticised art lacks the substance to add legitimate value to a space when it is so obviously constructed. Sinclair views such attempts to neutralise public space as damaging to London's 'original grid of energies' (Sinclair 2003). He perceives a neo-liberal motive behind the installation of such pieces in that they unconvincingly attempt to distract from the political and social realities of the city, such as the 'attendant beggars, winos and cripples' (Sinclair 2003) who line the path to the Minotaur sculpture. These sufferers are on the unpleasant end of a wealth gap fostered by Britain's capitalistically driven society and neo-liberal political values. Sinclair shows how ostensibly unassuming features of public space are in fact politically associated; a deliberate attempt at aesthetically enhancing the city in order to neutralise the visible inequality of neo-liberal values.

Sinclair's hostility is echoed by Miéville. Both depict an image of London as a site of capitalist veneer, implying that urban space has become a domain which can be exploited for capital at the expense of physical freedom and individual expression. Miéville describes the advertising that now cloaks London as both inescapable and dangerous: '[t]he fronts of every step out of the tube, so, rising from the earth, you're faced with strips of meaningless enthusiasm about product[...]Marketing chokes London as vigorously as Wells' end-of-the-world Martian flora' (Miéville, 2012). Miéville's language here - alongside a reference to 'Martian flora' brought to Earth by extra-terrestrial invaders in H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* - transforms the commercial billboards and signs into a predatory life force. The capitalist noise is rendered alien by Miéville's language here, in this way he highlights that this noise has become part of normality in our everyday experiences of city space. By characterising London's population as prey for profit hungry perpetrators of this alien capitalist growth, Miéville reveals his cynical attitude towards commercialisation as a suffocating force on London. In *London's Overthrow*, the modern city

¹ The temple of Mithras refers to the remains of an ancient Roman temple, discovered below a London car park in 1954. At the time of Sinclair's writing *Lights Out For the Territory*, the remains of the temple was on display at a separate site (Temple Court) to make room

for a modern office build in its original place. Its restoration at Temple Court was widely criticized for its relocation and inauthenticity. The remains have since been moved back to their original site and restored again as part of Bloomberg's European headquarters building.

denies organic relations with space because it is so geared towards consumer culture.

RESISTING THE BRAND-SCAPE

Both Miéville and Sinclair detect threatened local cultures as a result of the conditioning of the city. These cultures are represented on a local level, while capitalism and neo-liberalist powers operate on a global level. *Light's Out* and *London's Overthrow* explore how these global capitalist forces create a disconnected underclass, or 'underbelly' local population, who are forced into a submissive existence in their own city. Sinclair describes signs denoting the safety measures in place in Victoria Park: 'This plague of information, on lavish boards at each entrance, is a mixture of self-serving political rhetoric and pious revisionism' (Sinclair, 2003). Here he suggests further political motives behind the assertion of authority over space: the desire to prevent public space from being used as a domain for anti-establishment activity is masked by a pseudo-concern for public welfare. Sinclair demonstrates that the regulation of public space is politically motivated, and deliberately undermines activities that might disrupt a neo-liberal, conservative vision of London. Using the example of a Gay Pride Festival which was held in Victoria Park, Sinclair shows how progressive social activity in supposedly public space is easily censured with claims that it is offensive to the space itself: 'Horrors, such as the trash alp aftermath of the Gay & Lesbian Pride Festival, when the park was "left littered with paper, cans, bottles and used condoms", were a future nightmare. 150,000 shirt lifters and muffdrivers pissing on the carpet' (Sinclair 2003). Sinclair sardonically emulates the right-wing criticism that targets minority group activity here, exposing the sanctimony that fronts a much deeper rooted intolerance for anything that disrupts their vision of supposedly free space. This highlights how use of space becomes involved in a wider political rhetoric.

London's Overthrow also explores the notion of minority groups being marginalised by political dictation of space. Miéville notes that 'London's growing fake public space abjures the backstreet-and-alleyway gestalt of the city. It and its planners have little room for any urban contingency' (Miéville 2012), suggesting that the voices, and communities which London's diverse cultural status is built upon, are being oppressed by a superficial conception of public space which forces 'otherness' into an underclass existence. He referred to these cultural underclasses in an interview titled 'On the lookout for a New Urban Uncanny': 'What is interesting for me over the next two decades is the extent to which that counter-city is to grow up in unexpected ways, because it will be like weeds growing up in the cracks and the concrete in these zones which have been designed to preclude it' (Miéville, Schmeink: 2013). Through this likening of counter-culture to weeds, Miéville draws upon the tensions between global powers and local voices that compete for space in the city. This perceived 'counter-city' growth through cracks in the pavement might be seen as a living counter life-force to his earlier image of advertisements as an alien life force which have created the 'pedestrian brandscapes' (Miéville, 2012) of London. The image he creates comparing global versus local voices to manmade concrete structures versus unruly natural plant life depicts the struggle of local attempts to reclaim space in the impenetrable hierarchal structures of the capitalist urban city. Like weeds, these local voices, despite being organic growth, are seen as menacing and unruly compared to the solid concrete structures of the city.

Miéville uses the example of the London's Grime scene – which in 2011 was still a predominantly underground music genre - as an example of local voices manifested in underground culture. He notes that 'In grime, representing your area, sometimes down to your street, is key. Not overtly political music, for the most part, it is, though, to the horror of splenetic politicians, an angry one.[...]We're buffeted by what they call the soundtrack to the riots.' (Miéville, 2012) Picking up on the importance of postcode pride and location as part of the appeal of this culture aligns it with the street violence that these 'splenic politicians' (Miéville, 2012) perceive Grime to be perpetrating. He goes on to note that despite this, there is 'no aggro, not among the dancers' (Miéville, 2012) when he attends a gig in the now gentrified Shoreditch, and yet

'There's been a sustained campaign against Grime from all establishment sides. Hancox mutters about form 696. The Met uses this notorious risk assessment paperwork in deciding to allow – or not to allow – musical events. Until 2008, almost unbelievably, its original wording ferretted ingeniously, 'Is there a particular ethnic group attending? If "yes" please state group.[...] Outrage. The wording changed, the targeting remained.' (Miéville, 2012)

The sustained campaign he refers to against Grime music involved the invocation of Form 696 to prevent certain grime artists from touring or performing at London venues. Miéville highlights here how underbelly cultures are literally being prohibited from taking up space, as the Met authorities use their power over city venues to target those they deem violent and angry. Uncoincidentally these are young minority groups, and this type of policing of their culture in urban space is systematic, suggesting that authorial measures to curb the creative output of supposedly violent youth groups is not tackling the core problem. Most recently, a group of performers belonging to a sub-genre of UK rap called Drill under the name *1011* - a title pertaining to the members postcode - have had their videos removed from YouTube and been banned by the Met police from creating music or performing without first obtaining police permission. We see that cultures are now being prevented from taking up space online as well as on the streets of London, but the targeting remains the same. Grime and Drill are music cultures which resist the gentrification and whitewashing of London, and the measures taken against them offer an example of how authorities are able to dominate space and take measures to actively prevent the freedom of sub-cultures in London.

IN CONCLUSION

Light's Out For The Territory and *London's Overthrow* are texts which reinvent a literary relationship with walking in the contemporary city. Sinclair uses psychogeography as both a physical and a literary mechanism to unearth his deeper political concerns with the city space of London. Miéville's text pays homage to Sinclair's psychogeographic project in London, and raises further concerns over the impact of austerity and neo-liberalism on London a decade later. Sinclair and Miéville convey the spaces that make up London as territory that is subjugated by neoliberal power. By exploring the tensions that exist between local voices and global powers in everyday public spaces, the texts depict how neo-liberalist ideology is bound up with our everyday experience of space, as well as how local authorities are able to prevent underground culture from accessing these spaces. The fundamental action of walking is shown to be heavily influenced by urban structures as well as exposure to advertisements perpetuating consumerist culture.

Sinclair and Miéville are able to explore the potential of Psychogeography as a contemporary tool to evaluate the impact of political power on space and culture. Their work shows how control over space can uphold deep-rooted political and social tensions between communities in the modern capitalist city.

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